



Testimony Regarding

HB 5037, An Act Adjusting the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2023

Department of Social Services Budget

Appropriations Committee

February 23, 2022

Good evening Senators Osten, Kushner & Cicarella, Representatives Walker, Abercrombie & Betts, and members of the Committee. My name is Jean Hartnett, and I am a Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Advocate at The Center for Empowerment and Education. We provide confidential services at no cost to domestic violence and sexual assault victims in 13 towns in the Greater Danbury area including Bethel, Bridgewater, Brookfield, Danbury, Kent, New Fairfield, New Milford, Newtown, Redding, Ridgefield, Roxbury, Sherman, and Washington. We are a member organization of the Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence and the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence.

One-time CSFRF Allocation to Address Victims' Safety Risks & Needs - \$2,900,000

We thank Governor Lamont for his proposal to allocate \$2,900,000 in FY23 from the Coronavirus State Fiscal Recovery Fund (CSFRF) to the Department of Social Services (DSS) to address victims' safety risks and needs, which have been intensified by the pandemic, and urge your support. This funding will assist CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence's (CCADV) 18 member organizations, including The Center for Empowerment and Education, with providing critical assistance to victims including sheltering/hoteling, food, transportation costs, basic needs, childcare assistance, housing, moving, utilities, and furniture assistance.

Throughout the pandemic we have seen an increase in the complexity of issues facing survivors and financial support for direct client emergency needs, like those listed above, is a common request from survivors struggling to achieve financial independence from their abusers during the pandemic. One rape victim that I accompanied to the hospital had no furnishings other than a mattress on the floor of her apartment. This allocation of one-time pandemic relief funding will allow our service system to provide much needed emergency assistance to survivors struggling to achieve financial independence from their abusers during the pandemic.

In addition to the emergency financial needs of survivors, this funding will assist with the ongoing emergency housing needs of survivors fleeing their abusive homes. For years Connecticut's domestic violence shelters have functioned well-above capacity with an average utilization rate of 122% between fiscal years 2016 and 2020, meaning shelters were overflowing year-round. But with the pandemic, shelter utilization has seen a sharp increase and the cost has skyrocketed due to the need to rely more heavily on the use of hoteling to properly social distance existing shelter space.

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When the Covid 19 pandemic started we needed to quickly move several women out of our residential housing in order to maintain social distancing. We were able to find alternate housing and were able to provide our clients with necessities to set up their new homes.

To date, we have received various pandemic relief funds through both DSS and the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, as well as having the opportunity to leverage private philanthropic dollars. However, we anticipate that hoteling will continue as a significant cost through FY23. Additional one-time CSFRF will be critical to addressing the ongoing emergency shelter and emergency financial needs of survivors.

Annual Funding to Support Domestic Violence Child & Family Advocates - \$1,440,000

In addition to supporting the Governor's proposal for use of CSFRF to assist survivors, we're calling on the General Assembly to allocate annual funding in the amount of \$1,440,000 to fund 18 domestic violence child & family advocates across the state at CCADV's member organizations, including one here at The Center for Empowerment and Education. Connecticut currently does not provide any state funding to support this critical role within the domestic violence service system.

As the pandemic has stretched on longer than any of us originally anticipated, the secondary effects of this global crisis continue to play out in communities and homes across Connecticut. Much attention has rightfully been paid to the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and social-emotional development of children. This concern is only heightened for those children who, on top of dealing with pandemic isolation, have been experiencing domestic violence in their homes.

I recently accompanied a client to court whose children witnessed domestic violence in their home during the pandemic. They spent quite a bit of time hiding with their mother in their house from the husband before he was finally removed from the house. Custodial custody was subsequently granted to the mother. She is currently living our transitional housing and working with the Center receiving counseling and help to become able to live independently with her children.

These children have continued in counseling with our wonderful child advocates to deal with their trauma.

Currently, federal pass-through funds in the amount of \$11,500 support only about a quarter of the cost of a full-time advocate. In the end, even with our efforts to cobble together the position of child & family advocate, we know that we aren't able to truly dedicate the time we need to fully meet the needs of all children experiencing domestic violence in the greater Danbury area.

As we begin to come out of the pandemic, we are concerned that there will be a large influx of children presenting with significant need to various systems, including the domestic violence service system. We must be prepared to meet the needs of these most vulnerable victims. Adequate state funding is needed to properly support a full-time advocate at each of the state's 18 domestic violence

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organizations, including The Center for Empowerment and Education. For a small amount of annual funding (less than 0.01% of the overall state budget), we can make a big impact on kids.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Jean Hartnett

Sexual Assault/Domestic Violence Advocate

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